

DIMITER ANGUELOV  
HOW  
THE BULGARIAN  
STATE  
WAS FOUNDED



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The founding of the Bulgarian state in 681 A.D. in the north-eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula was one of the outstanding events not only in Bulgarian history, but also in the history of all of South-eastern Europe. Bulgaria was the first Slav state to firmly establish itself and survive – at the cost of unrelenting struggle – against the Byzantine Empire, the strongest political and military power of the early Middle Ages. It was the first state of that period to play a role in the international affairs of South-Eastern and Central Europe and which the rulers of a number of countries had to take into account. Bulgaria was a cultural factor of major importance for that time. It was the first country in which the Slav script, brought there by the disciples of Cyril and Methodius, found favourable conditions to develop and later spread to the other Slav states and peoples.

The founding of the Bulgarian state was also of paramount importance for the ethnical, social and cultural development of the Bulgarian people during the Middle Ages. It made possible the formation of a monolithic Bulgarian nationality at that early date, one capable of withstanding all storms, defending its freedom against hostile encroachments



and creating remarkable material and cultural values. The manifold creative manifestations of the Bulgarian people in the Middle Ages, which were an indisputable contribution to the development both of Balkan and European history, could scarcely have been realized without the organizing and welding role of the state.

## HISTORICAL SOURCES

The sources from which we draw information about the founding and consolidation of the Bulgarian state are numerous. The Bulgarian monuments of the Middle Ages are the most important and reliable historical records. Thus the *List of the Names of the Bulgarian Khans* gives the names of the khans in the 7-8th centuries, their family tree and the years marking the beginning and end of their reigns. It begins with the khans of the house of Doulo, which sired the first sovereign of the Bulgarian state, Asparouh, and ends with Khan Oumor (766). The List is in two parts. The first was written during the reign of Asparouh, who thus sought to glorify his dynasty, while the second was compiled by his successors. Both parts were written in Greek, which was then the official language of the state. The Greek original did not survive but a later Slavonic translation has come down to us.

Other Bulgarian monuments include inscriptions hewn out of stone on the orders of Kroum, Omourtag and other Bulgarian khans. They, too, are written in Greek and contain various items of information. Some of them tell of the construction work done during the reign of the khans, of wars and international contracts, others honour the memory of former outstanding statesmen, still others tell us about the ad-



ministrative and military organization of the state. The inscriptions are a valuable source of information about the political, socio-economic, ethnic and cultural history of Bulgaria in the period between the end of the 8th and the end of the 10th centuries, when the Bulgarian state gradually strengthened its position and emerged as an important factor in the Balkans.

The rock relief near the village of Madara in Shoumen district of north-eastern Bulgaria is one of the most noteworthy monuments bearing inscriptions. It was hewn at a height of 23 m on a 120 m high rock and depicts a horseman, a dog running after him and a lion beneath it, pierced by a spear. There are remnants of three inscriptions in Greek on it, the first dating back to the reign of Khan Tervel (701-718), the second – to his successor Kormesii, and the third – to Omourtag (814-831). The inscriptions throw light on the relations between Bulgaria and Byzantium in the respective periods and are in a way a historical chronicle in stone immortalizing the deeds of the Bulgarian rulers.

Besides the Bulgarian monuments, the works of Byzantine historians and writers of the 8th-10th centuries contain a vast quantity of information about the founding and consolidation of the Bulgarian state. Here we should mention the names of Theophanes, Patriarch Nicephorus (the beginning of the 9th century), Georgius Monachus, Theophanes's successors, Genesius, Simeon Logothetos, Leo Deacon, etc. (9-10th centuries). The Byzantine historians and writers take a natural interest in Bulgaria's history, as Byzantium was Bulgaria's neighbour for several centuries and the two states maintained close economic, political and cultural ties. It needs to be remembered, however, that on many occasions the

Byzantine writers were strongly biased in describing events connected with Bulgarian history and relations between the two states. The Bulgarians were often their sworn enemies and they tended to characterize them by negative epithets, the most common of which was 'barbarians'.

A number of medieval writers in Italy, France and Germany took an interest in the history of the Bulgarian state between the 7th and 10th centuries. This is due to the fact that soon after its foundation the Bulgarian state began to play a significant role in the life of South-eastern and later Central Europe. The monarchs in Western Europe came to know the names of the Bulgarian people and the Bulgarian rulers and it was only natural that they should merit mention in the historical chronicles which were written there.

As is well-known, the Bulgarian state was founded in 680-681 in the north-eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula. It was not accidental but came after a prolonged and complex process involving two basic ethnic elements – the Slavs and Proto-Bulgarians, who came to the Balkan Peninsula in the 6th-7th century. The Thracians, the indigenous population which the Slavs and Proto-Bulgarians found on their arrival in these parts, were also included in the Bulgarian state.

The existence of three ethnic elements, which were united into one state and whose merger ultimately shaped the Bulgarian nationality, obliges us to trace the historical path of each one separately.



## THE THRACIANS

The Thracians were the earliest inhabitants of the Bulgarian lands mentioned in written historical sources. The works of the Greek writers of the 5th-4th centuries B.C. – Herodotus, Xenophon and Thucydides – contain a wealth of information about them. At that time they inhabited a vast territory between the Danube and the Black and Aegean Seas in the eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula. Thracians also settled to the north of the Danube and in some regions in Asia Minor. The Thracians' neighbours on the Balkan Peninsula to the west were the Illyrians, and to the south the Greeks.

According to the Greek historian Herodotus the Thracians were the most numerous people on earth after the Indians. They were, however, rather scattered and divided into a large number of tribes. The Odryssae, Astae and Bessi were among the tribes inhabiting what today is southern Bulgaria; the Triballi, Moesians and Getae settled in north-eastern and north-western Bulgaria. South-western Bulgaria was inhabited by the tribe Serdi, which gave the name Serdica to the ancient Thracian town which is the present-day capital Sofia. Poulpoudeva (present-day Plovdiv) was another important Thracian town. Thracian settlements also sprang up along the Black Sea coast; Messambria, the present-day Nessebur, was one of them.

The Thracians' main occupation was farming and stockbreeding, but they were also familiar with some crafts. Ore-mining and metal processing were well developed and the Thracians made bronze, iron and gold objects – implements, weapons, jewellery, etc. Objects from neighbouring Greece



were imported to Thrace and were mainly used by the aristocracy.

The Thracians did not have a script of their own and only a few insignificant traces of their language have come down to us. It has been proved that they belonged to the Indo-European ethnolinguistic group. Monuments with Thracian inscriptions in Greek have been discovered in various parts in Bulgaria, but have not been deciphered so far. The longest inscription dates back to the 6th century B.C. and was found near the village of Kyolmen, near Preslav, in northern Bulgaria. Another interesting Thracian inscription is the one found in the village of Ezerovo, near the town of Purvomai in southern Bulgaria.

As the Thracians had no script of their own they were very open to foreign linguistic and ethnic influence. In ancient times the Thracians who lived along the Black Sea and Aegean coast were subjected to the ethnic and cultural influence of the Greek colonies there, which were set up in the 7th-6th century B.C.

At the beginning of the 5th century B.C. some of the scattered Thracian tribes to the south of the Balkan Range united to form the first state organization headed by the tribe of the Odryssae. It covered a considerable territory in southern and eastern Thrace and its principal town was Uscudama (present-day Edirne). Seuthopolis, named after the Thracian king Seuthes of the end of the 4th century B.C., was another big town situated near present-day Kazanluk. It was built on an area of 46,000 sq.m. and was surrounded by a 2 m high fortress wall with turrets.

Unfortunately, the state of the Odryssae which temporarily united the Thracian tribes did not survive for very long. At



the beginning of the 4th century B.C. it was attacked and defeated by the Macedonian kings Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great (336-323). Up to the year 281 the state was under Macedonian domination, which gave a new impetus to the Greek influence on the Thracians, as the ruling aristocracy was the bearer of it. After a hard-fought struggle the Thracians overthrew the foreign domination but then became exposed to the attacks of the Celtic tribes which came from Western and Central Europe. A small Celtic state was founded in eastern Thrace which survived up to 218 B.C. After its disintegration, the Thracians once again became independent and the state of the Odryssae was restored. It was, however, very weak and the former scattering of the Thracian tribes continued to characterize its social, economic and political development.

At the beginning of the 3rd century B.C., the Romans set foot on the Balkan Peninsula, having already conquered the whole of Italy and still in search of new lands. In 148 they subjugated the Macedonian state and two years later took control of the Greek territory. After a brief period of calm the conquerors focused their attention on the Thracian tribes to the north and south of the Balkan Range. In an unrelenting and prolonged struggle the tribes between the Danube and the Balkan Range were overwhelmed first (Getae, Triballi, Moesians, etc.) and the Roman province of Moesia was set up in 15 B.C., later to be divided into Upper and Lower Moesia. Then the tribes to the south of the Balkan Range were conquered. In the 1st century A.D. the weak and fragmented state of the Odryssae was subjugated by the Romans who founded a new province, Thrace, in 46 A.D. Thus all the Thracians were conquered.



The subjugation of the Balkan Peninsula by the Romans led to fundamental changes in the economic and socio-political life of the Thracians. In place of the fragmented Thracian tribes a strong empire was founded in which the slave system dominated. The situation of the latter deteriorated. Part of their lands was seized by the conquerors and turned into big farms. A great many Thracians were killed or made serfs (coloni); many of them were driven out of their homeland into Italy where they were used as gladiators. The Thracian Spartacus, who headed the Slave Rebellion in Italy in 74 B.C., became very famous. The Thracians refused to bow their heads before the conquerors though they were subjugated and in a difficult situation. They rioted against the foreign domination and voiced their longing for a free and independent life. This is brilliantly evidenced by a petition from the village people of Scaptora, a Thracian settlement built in what is now the Gramada district of Blagoevgrad in southwestern Bulgaria. They voiced all their grievances suffered under the oppression of the foreign administrator and insisted that the Roman Emperor Gordianus III (238-244) take measures to improve their lot.

The Roman administration resorted to various measures in order to handle the peaceloving Thracian population who actively defended their rights. Large fortified centres were built for military garrisons, the existing road network was extended to facilitate the efficient management of the conquered territories and the movement of troops in the threatened regions. A large number of coloni were transferred from Italy and the other provinces into the settlements. Some of them were Romanized, others Hellenized, and thus an ethnic medley was created which had a negative effect on the



original cultural and spiritual development of the Thracian population.

Latin was proclaimed the official and obligatory language in Thrace as in the other Roman provinces. Latin was used by the local administration, in the army and on the memorial inscriptions. Thus the process of Hellenization which had begun much earlier was supplemented by the process of Romanization. This was a serious obstacle to the preservation of the Thracian ethos and helped the reverse process.

The introduction of Christianity as the official religion in 357 during the reign of Constantius was also unfavourable to the ethnic development of the Thracian tribes. The introduction of a new, alien cult dealt a blow to the religious beliefs of the Thracians and also to the uniqueness and purity of their material and spiritual culture, their lifestyle and its ancient traditions and customs.

It should be noted, however, that the processes of Hellenization and Romanization did not affect all sections of the population to the same extent. Those most susceptible to foreign influence and more threatened by the loss of their sense of identity were the inhabitants of the towns and, above all, those of them who became part of the local ruling strata. The Thracian peasants, which were the majority, stuck firmly to their language, beliefs and centuries-old traditions. We know that despite the strict orders that services should be performed in Latin, the Bessi, one of the strongest and most freedom-loving of Thracian tribes, continued to worship in their mother tongue for many generations. The ancient Thracians' tradition of burying their dead in burial mounds lived on and also the belief in the main Thracian deity — Heros (the Horseman), which is evidenced by several thousand votive tablets.



Thracian popular art preserved its vitality and characteristic stylistic and artistic features, though it also changed gradually under the influence of foreign models and especially under the imposed Christianity.

From the beginning of the 3rd century A.D. the Balkan Peninsula became a permanent target of the barbarian advance. Various tribes of German, Sarmatian and Turkic origin, which had lived close to the northern frontiers of the Roman Empire (mainly in the present-day lands of southern Russia and the Wallachian Plain) began to make incursions across the Danube and to enter the lands of the Thracian population. The most devastating invasions were those of the Goths, who came from their settlements in southern Russia and penetrated deep into the Roman Empire, as far as present-day Greece. Their raids were accompanied by mass destruction and the abduction of large numbers of prisoners, among whom were many Thracians.

In 395 the Roman Empire finally split into two parts – the western one with Rome as its capital, and the eastern, centered on Constantinople. The Thracians remained under the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) which included all of the Balkan Peninsula. Meanwhile the incursions of the barbarians continued. After a relatively uneventful period, in the middle of the 5th century the Huns led by Attila began to make devastating raids. The north-western and central regions of the Balkan Peninsula suffered most and a number of towns were completely razed to the ground. The Thracian centre Serdica was one of them.

The barbarian incursions, which shook the Balkan Peninsula for three centuries, brought about radical ethnic and demographic changes. Part of the local population (mainly

Thracians and Illyrians) was killed and another was abducted into slavery. An insignificant number of newcomers of other ethnic origin – German, Sarmatian and Turkic, settled in the Balkan Peninsula. Thus the existing ethnic medley was further enriched. Yet the Thracians, some of whom were Hellenized or Romanized, though the majority preserved their ethnic integrity, continued to dominate in the present-day Bulgarian lands. They were oppressed by the Byzantine administration, forced to pay heavy taxes and work without reward; they never ceased to strive to overthrow the foreign domination. Their hatred of the conquerors, which was evident as early as the first century after the Romans overwhelmed them, never weakened.

## THE SLAVS

The first Slav raids occurred in this explosive atmosphere on the Balkan Peninsula. The Slavs belonged to the Indo-European ethnic group and were divided into many tribes. Two Slav tribal groups – the Slavonians and the Antae, which bordered on the Byzantine Empire, became known in the 5th and 6th centuries. The Slavonians inhabited the region between the Danube and the Carpathians in present-day Romania and Hungary (the old province of Pannonia) and also part of present-day Ukraine as far as the Dniester. In the first half of the 5th century the Slavonians who lived in Pannonia were under Hun domination but later liberated themselves. The Antae were the Slavonians' neighbours to the east and occupied a large territory in present-day southern Russia between the Dnieper and the Dniester. The two tribal



groups had almost identical languages, cultures and ways of life.

Farming and stockbreeding provided the basic livelihood of the Slavonians and the Antae. Some crafts like pottery, carpentry and iron working were also developed but trade was of lesser importance. The groups traded mainly with the Byzantine Empire to which they exported foodstuffs, timber, etc., and imported weapons, expensive fabrics, luxury objects, etc. The Slavs lived mainly in dugout dwellings in villages. In the 5th and 6th centuries, when the Slavs became neighbours of the Byzantine Empire, they were at the stage of so-called military democracy, i.e. the last stage of disintegration of the communal system. The large family was the basic cell of the Slav society. It included the sons of one father together with their wives and children. Later it was known as *Zadruga* (house-community). Several zadrugas situated close to one another formed a community and several communities made up a tribe. Each tribe was headed by a chieftain who had a battalion at his disposal. In wartime he had full power over the tribe but in peacetime he was restricted by the council of the family elders, whose opinion he had to take into consideration. The tribal chieftains had to convene a general tribal assembly, in which all free men capable of bearing arms participated.

The first Slav attacks against Byzantium began at the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 6th century during the reign of the Emperor Anastasius I (491-518). Their inroads became especially frequent and dangerous in Justinian I's reign (527-565). According to the Byzantine historian Procopius, almost every year the invaders crossed the Danube and penetrated deep into the south of the Byzantine



Empire. In order to put an end to their incursions the Romans built a number of fortresses along the Danube, on the slopes of the Balkan Range, in the Rhodope Mountains, in Epirus and Macedonia. But their efforts were of no avail. The pressure of the newcomers increased with every passing year and the threat they posed for the Balkan lands of Byzantium grew stronger.

One of the main reasons for the successful incursions of the Slavs south of the Danube was the fact that the local population, i.e. the Thracians, were not inclined to oppose the invaders. Moreover, having been politically and culturally oppressed by the foreign administration for many generations, burdened with taxes and levies, the Thracians tended in some cases to support the newcomers from the north. The Byzantine historian Procopius who witnessed the events testifies that many of the inhabitants of the Balkan Peninsula chose to abandon their homes and seek asylum with the barbarians. This was not accidental as the majority of Thracians were in a rather unenviable situation in their native lands, being for the most part coloni or slaves. At the same time the Slavs were still at the stage of communal social system and slavery existed in milder forms. This was explicitly pointed out by the Byzantine historian Pseudo-Mauritius of the end of the 6th century. He wrote that the Slavs, unlike the other tribes, did not turn their captives into slaves but gave them some time to decide whether they wanted to return home in payment of a certain ransom or remain with them as free men and friends. This attitude towards the captives ran counter to the legal system of the Byzantine Empire according to which all captives remained ruthlessly oppressed slaves to the end of their lives. This could not but give food for thought and make the rank-and-



file subjects of the Empire look with confidence and hope to the 'barbarian world'. The Thracians, who had been oppressed for several centuries, regarded the Slavs as harsh and bellicose aggressors who, however, lived in a more democratic and just society. That is why the Thracian population was unwilling to fight the Slav invaders to defend the Byzantine rule and in some cases even sought asylum with the 'barbarians'.

Initially the Slavs were satisfied with plundering objects, cattle, weapon, jewels, etc., in their raids into the Byzantine Empire and then returned to their settlements beyond the Danube. In the second half of the 6th century, however, they began to settle permanently in the ravaged territory. In a century the Slavs managed to conquer almost the whole Balkan Peninsula without meeting any great resistance. This process was completed by the middle of the 7th century.

The Slav tribes which settled south of the Danube belonged to two basic groups: the Bulgarian and the Serbian-Croatian. The tribes of the latter occupied a large territory in the north-western part of the Balkan Peninsula. The tribes of the Bulgarian group occupied the old Roman provinces Upper and Lower Moesia (present-day northern Bulgaria and Dobroudja) and also Thrace and Macedonia, parts of northern, central and southern Greece and Albania. A number of tribes belonging to this group are mentioned in the various sources, for instance, the Severyans (in present-day Dobroudja), Rinhini, Sagoudati, Strimontsi, Dragovich, Berziti (in Macedonia), Vayuniti (in Epirus), Velegostichi (in Thessaly), Ezertsi and Milengi (in Peloponnesos). All these tribes, which were scattered over a vast territory in Moesia, Thrace, Macedonia and parts of Greece, spoke the same



language and had the same way of life and customs. Each tribe was headed by a local chieftain (knyaz) according to the Slav tribal organization, which they preserved in the newly conquered lands. All regions occupied by a Slav tribe were called 'Slavinia' by the Byzantine historians. Thus a great number of 'Slavinias' came into being on the Balkan Peninsula, corresponding to the number of Slav tribes which settled there.

It should be noted that some Slavs remained in their old settlements north of the Danube (in present-day Hungary and Romania) after others of their tribe inhabited the Balkan lands. This becomes evident from the archaeological excavations of dwellings, necropolises, etc., and also from the data derived from place names, etc.

The Slavs' mass settlement on the Balkan Peninsula in the 6th and 7th centuries brought them into close contact with the local population – Thracians, Illyrians, Greeks, etc. The Thracians continued to predominate in the lands occupied by the Slavs, though many of them were killed or abducted into slavery during their persistent attacks. According to data provided by toponymy, archaeology and linguistics, the North-western parts of the Balkan Peninsula i.e. the region between the Danube, the Black Sea, the Balkan Range and the Yantra river was rendered most desolate during that period. The local population was larger to the south of the Balkan Range (i.e. in the province of Thrace) and it was there that contact between Thracians and Slavs was closest and most direct. This was also the case in north-western Bulgaria. As a result, a number of local names of towns, rivers, mountains, etc., of Thracian origin were adopted by the newcomers and partially changed in conformity with the peculiarities of



their language system. Thus, for instance, the Slav Pluvdiv (later Plovdiv) derives from the Thracian Poulpoudeva, the Yantra River – from Yatrus, the Timok River – from Timacus, the Iskur River from Oskios, the Vit River – from the Utus, Nessebur – from Mesembria, Rhodopa – from the Rhodope, the Mesta River – from Nestos, etc. The fact that these Thracian names were adopted by the Slavs and have come down to the present times testifies to the close and prolonged contacts maintained between the two ethnic groups on their common territory of the Balkan Peninsula.

Despite the fact that the Slavs came to the Balkan Peninsula as conquerors, they did not aim to kill and wipe out the local population. On the contrary, they tried to establish contacts of cooperation and coexistence. This can be seen in the works of the Syrian writer Mihail, who gives interesting information about the process of the Slav settlement of the Balkan Peninsula. The Slavs told the local inhabitants to go out in the fields, sow and harvest as they were going to take only one half of their produce. Relations were established between the Slavs and the local population of the Balkan Peninsula which made it possible for them to live together and continue normal business life in the areas in which the Slavs settled.

The coexistence between Thracians and Slavs led to their merger and the wiping out of the existing differences in their way of life, beliefs and language, i.e. to a complex process of assimilation, which always occurs when two or more ethnic groups live on the same territory. In this process the Slavs who settled throughout the Balkan Peninsula were superior in number to the Thracians, which decreased considerably as a result of the frequent invasions and devastations. Thus the Thracians gradually disappeared, being absorbed into the



Slav mass. This process was completed, broadly speaking, in a century and a half – from the middle of the 6th century to the end of the 7th century. Little by little the Thracians lost their language and their ethnic self-awareness. Naturally the Thracian ethos was not lost without leaving a trace. As has already been pointed out, a number of Thracian names of rivers, mountains and settlements survived because the Slavs adopted them in their toponymy and hydronymy. Some customs and beliefs were also preserved, for example, the Koukeri dance, the cult of the nymphs, etc. They were taken over by the Slavs and further developed in their heathen religion. Some Thracian words like *karpa* (a rock) and *roufa* (lightning) were adopted by the Slavonic language, and also some names like *Dako*, *Geto*, etc. Anthropology also provides evidence of the influence of the Balkan and Thracian substratum in particular on the Slav ethnos, without in any way repudiating the complete victory of the Slav ethnic element which became firmly established through its language, its material and cultural standards and ethnic self-awareness. Only a small part of the Thracians (mainly those inhabiting the mountainous regions) remained untouched by the process of assimilation and thus preserved their ethnic identity for a longer time. The Balkan Wallachians and Karakachani are descendents of these Thracians.

The Slavs' settling on the Balkan Peninsula had far-reaching consequences not only as regards the demographic and ethnic changes which set in, but also for the immanent development of Slav society itself. New impetus was given to the process of material and social differentiation among the various Slav tribes. The tribe's military aristocracy, which organized the raids into the Byzantine Empire and kept the greatest part of



the booty for themselves (jewellery, weapons, cattle, etc.), began to stand out with their wealth and power. When settling in the peninsula they took the best and most fertile lands, while the rank-and-file soldiers and their families were given smaller plots. Thus, after the conquering of the Balkan Peninsula, the Slav aristocracy, which already enjoyed superiority as regards personal property, gained superiority in real estate, too. This created conditions for the further disintegration of the communal system and the setting up of a stronger administrative and military organization charged with consolidating the position of the economically and politically strong strata of the Slav society. In other words, the conditions for the gradual setting up of a state as a better organized organ of administration than the communal tribal forms were gaining momentum.

Not only the development of socio-economic relations in the Slav society but also the foreign political and military set-up created after the settlement of the Slav tribes on the Balkan Peninsula led towards the foundation of a state. They faced a strong and dangerous enemy, i.e. the Byzantine Empire, which tried to subjugate them and restore its domination over its former territories. The threat posed by Byzantium made some Slav tribes unite to form political and military unions. According to the data provided by the Byzantine writers Theophanes and Nicephorus, such a union was set up in the second half of the 7th century among the Slav tribes in the north-eastern part of Bulgaria. It included seven Slav tribes whose names we do not know and one other tribe — the Severians, which at that time inhabited Little Scythia (present-day Dobroudja). It seems that this union of eight tribes also included some of the Slavs who at that time still liv-



ed in their original settlements beyond the Danube, in the present-day Wallachian Plain. The Slavs united in order to be able to defend themselves against possible attempts on the part of the Byzantine Empire to recapture its lost territories. It is known that in the year 658 A. D. the Byzantine Emperor Constantine II organized a campaign against the Slavs in Aegean Thrace and southern Macedonia, conquering some of them and turning them into subjects of the Empire. The Slavs to the north of the Balkan Range were also threatened by military attack, although they were far from the centre of the Empire. It should be presumed that the union of the seven tribes and the Severians was directly linked with the intensification of Byzantine military action and that it was probably established as a natural and necessary counter-measure soon after the Byzantine campaign.

The Proto-Bulgarians came to the Bulgarian lands when the existing situation on the Balkan Peninsula in the second half of the 7th century had prompted the Slav tribes to build up stronger and lasting organizations for reasons of domestic socio-economic and foreign policies. Their arrival sped up this process and contributed to the foundation of the first Slav state on the Balkans, which was the result of joint actions and close cooperation between Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs.

## THE PROTO-BULGARIANS

The Proto-Bulgarians had a somewhat eventful history prior to their arrival on the Balkan Peninsula. The earliest written sources indicate that they inhabited the region to the north of the Caucasus in the 4th century A.D. and had close contact with the Georgians and Armenians. They belonged to the Turkic ethno-linguistic group and their language resembled that of the Huns, Khazars, Avars and other tribes. As time went by, however, they mixed with tribes of Indo-European origin. The Proto-Bulgarians, not unlike the Slavs, were divided into numerous tribes each headed by a chieftain.

At the end of the 4th century the Huns, who moved westwards from Central Asia, passed through their lands. On their way they abducted a part of the Proto-Bulgarian population and led them to the old Roman province of Pannonia (present-day Hungary) where a Hun tribal union was founded, headed by Attila. As subjects of the Hun ruler the Proto-Bulgarians took part in his military campaigns against the Longobardians. After Attila's death and the disintegration of the Hun tribal union, the Pannonian Proto-Bulgarians moved eastwards and settled in the region between the Dniester and the Dnieper. In this way the Proto-Bulgarian ethnos was divided into two parts according to the territories occupied; some of them continued to live in their old lands north of the Caucasus, while others inhabited the plains of the present-day Ukraine near the mouth of the Danube.

In the second half of the 6th century the Caucasus Proto-Bulgarians suffered renewed attacks by different enemies. First their lands were raided by the Avars (a tribe of Turkic origin) which came from Central Asia. Passing through the



steppes of Southern Russia, the Avars abducted various local tribes including Proto-Bulgarians and drove them once again to Pannonia. Thus the strong Avar Khaganate sprang up, subjugated the Proto-Bulgarians and those Slavs who at that time still lived along the middle reaches of the Danube and Tissa.

A new blow was dealt on the Caucasus Proto-Bulgarians soon after by the so-called Western Turks, who became a major political factor in the history of the Volga and Caucasus regions after the '60s of the 6th century. Thus, in the second half of the 6th century the Proto-Bulgarian ethnos was scattered and also lost its political independence.

The socio-economic development of the Proto-Bulgarians in the 6th-7th centuries was almost on the same level as that of the Slavs. The communal system at the stage of military democracy was predominant. The formation of a rich and influential military-tribal aristocracy was underway, there existed social contradictions and disagreements on property rights. Prerequisites for the foundation of a state were coming into being in Proto-Bulgarian society, but this process was hindered by the incursions of Huns, Avars and Turks, who split up the Proto-Bulgarian tribes and did not allow them to unite territorially or politically.

It is worth noting that the Proto-Bulgarians had the opportunity to establish long and close contacts with a number of Slav tribes as a result of the foreign raids which scattered them to different territories.

Such contacts were maintained between the Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs in Pannonia, where the two ethnic groups lived together initially under Hun domination (in the 4th century) and later under Avar domination (in the 6th century). It is

known that the Pannonian Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs participated together in the campaigns organized by the Avar Khagan against the Byzantine Empire. Thus, for example, in 626 Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs besieged the Byzantine capital Constantinople under the leadership of the Avars. As a result of the life they shared in Pannonia, they began to intermingle and learn each other's languages.

Contacts between Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs were also established in the 6th-7th centuries in a vast territory to the north of the Lower Danube and the present-day Ukraine (between the rivers Prut, Seret, Dniester and Dnieper). This is testified to by data from archaeological inspections of dwellings, necropolises, jewellery, implements, etc. There is no doubt that the contacts thus established between Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs when they lived north of the Danube were of some importance. The fact that the two ethnic groups knew one another favoured their rapid unification and the foundation of a joint state, an event which took place later on the Balkan Peninsula.

Internecine struggles flared up at the end of the 6th century in the Turkic Khaganate in southern Russia, under whose domination were the Caucasus Proto-Bulgarians. This enabled them to free themselves and set up an independent political organization. It is known for sure that at the beginning of the 7th century an independent union existed which was referred to as 'Great Bulgaria' by the Byzantine writers. Its first ruler was Gostoun, followed by Koubrat (Kourt). According to the *List of the Names of the Bulgarián Khans* the latter reigned for 60 years and according to the story of the Byzantine chronicler Theophanes he died during the reign of the



Byzantine Emperor Constantine II (641-668), probably about 650 A.D.

It can be assumed from the scanty information available that Great Bulgaria occupied a large territory to the north and north-west of the Caucasus in present-day southern Russia. The Proto-Bulgarians, who at that time still lived in a number of tribal units, formed the core of this political union.

Soon after Koubrat's death the Khazars invaded Great Bulgaria. They were of Turkic origin and their language and way of life were related to those of the Proto-Bulgarians. Under their attacks the big tribal union disintegrated. A group of Proto-Bulgarians, led by Bayan, Koubrat's son, remained in its homeland and was subjugated by the Khazar Khaganate. Another group, led by Koubrat's second son, Kotrag, set off northwards along the Volga. These Proto-Bulgarians laid the foundations of so-called Volgan Bulgaria, which survived as an independent state until the first half of the 13th century. The third group of Proto-Bulgarians, headed by Koubrat's youngest son, Asparouh (Isperih), according to the *List of the Bulgarian Khans*, moved westwards, crossed the Dnieper and Dniester and settled in present-day Southern Bessarabia, bordering onto the Byzantine Empire. This is thought to have happened in about 660 A.D. The region occupied by the Proto-Bulgarians headed by Asparouh was known among Byzantine writers as Oglos.

The Byzantine chroniclers Theophanes and Patriarch Nicephorus, whose works dating back to the beginning of the 9th century were based on older writings which have not survived, give data about the march westwards of Asparouh's company and its settling in the Oglos. Both state that the place chosen by Asparouh was to the north of the Danube



and was very suitable for defence purposes. According to Theophanes the Bulgarian leader noticed that the place was well protected and inaccessible as there was a marsh in front of it and it was surrounded by rivers forming a ring around it, thus providing great security from the enemies for the people, weakened by the split. (Here Theophanes refers to the disintegration of Great Bulgaria.) Patriarch Nicephorus described the Oglos region in the same way. He wrote that the third brother, known by the name of Asparouh, crossed the Dnieper and Dniester and settled near the Ister. He found a suitable place for settlement which in their language was called Oglos. It was inaccessible for their enemies as there was an impenetrable marsh in front of it and it was surrounded by inaccessible steep hills rising up like a wall.

We have no data concerning the relations between Asparouh and the Byzantine rulers at that initial stage but it seems that they were peaceful. Later on, however, the Proto-Bulgarians began to cross the Danube and penetrate into the territory of Byzantium. According to information supplied by Theophiles, the Proto-Bulgarians first raided the lands south of the Danube in 680. The Proto-Bulgarians led by Asparouh made several incursions south of the Danube and caused great alarm among the rulers in Constantinople.

Under these circumstances the Byzantine Emperor Constantine IV (668-685) Pogonatus decided to launch an attack and undertook a special campaign against the newcomers. The chronicler Theophanes wrote: 'When the Emperor Constantine learnt that a dirty and unrefined people had settled in the Oglos beyond the Danube and had raided and plundered the lands belonging to Byzantium, he was very hurt and ordered all battallions to march into Thrace. He armed the navy and



set off against them by land and by sea with the aim of driving them out. He sent the infantry off in battle readiness towards the Oglos and the Danube and ordered the ships to cast anchor on the near bank. When the Bulgarians saw the large force advancing towards them they despaired of their lives, fled to the above-mentioned fortification and took measures for defence. For three- or four days they dared not leave this fortification; the Byzantines did not start a battle either because of the marshes. This dirty people understood the weakness of the Byzantines, pulled themselves together and grew more daring. The Emperor suffered from pains in the legs and had to return with his close associates in five ships to Mesembria to take baths. He gave the strategists and the troops orders to wage battle, to draw the Bulgarians out of their fortification and fight with them if they did. If they did not — to besiege them. The horsemen, however, spread the rumour that the Emperor had fled and, overwhelmed by fear, started to flee themselves without being pursued. When the Bulgarians witnessed this, they started to pursue the Byzantine troops, killed the majority with their swords and wounded many others. They pursued them as far as the Danube, crossed the river and reached so-called Varna near Odessos.'

Patriarch Nicephorus described the campaign against the Proto-Bulgarians organized by Constantine IV Pogonatus in almost the same words. He wrote that when Constantine learnt of the raids into parts of the Roman Empire carried out by the people living along the Ister, he decided to destroy them. He sent heavily armed troops into Thrace, summoned the navy and set it off against this people to defend his territory. When the Bulgarians saw a large number of horsemen and ships they were filled with fear at this un-



expected and sudden attack, fled to their fortifications and stood there for four days. The Byzantine troops could not start a battle as the place was inaccessible; the Bulgarians gathered their wits about them and plucked up courage. The Emperor suffered a bad attack of podagra and sailed off to Mesembria for treatment, having ordered his generals and troops to besiege the fortifications and take measures to drive back this people. However, a rumour was spread about that the Emperor had taken to flight. The Byzantine troops were alarmed and quickly ran away although no one pursued them. Then the Bulgarians began to chase them and killed all the soldiers they captured and also wounded a number of them. They crossed the Ister and came down to so-called Varna near Odessos and the inner lands.

The chroniclers Theophanes and Nicephorus did not say anything about the date of this campaign, as a result of which the Byzantine troops were routed and the Proto-Bulgarians penetrated deep into the areas south of the Danube. However, bearing in mind that the first Proto-Bulgarians' incursion occurred in the middle or the end of April 680 and that Asparouh made several more inroads in the regions south of the Danube later, it may be presumed that this campaign took place in the middle or at the end of the summer.

The rout of the Byzantine troops and the penetration of the Proto-Bulgarians far south of the Danube, as far as the Odessos region (present-day Varna), gave rise to new important events which in the final count led to the foundation of the Slav-Bulgarian state. The Proto-Bulgarian leader came into contact with the Slav tribes living in the conquered territory, mainly the old province of Little Scythia (present-day Dobroudja).



Theophanes and Nicephorus described, too, the events connected with the relations between the company led by Asparouh and the Slav tribes. They wrote that the Proto-Bulgarians saw that the place was safe because the Danube was behind it and ravines and the Pontic Sea (the Black Sea) in front of it. They subjugated the so-called seven Slav tribes among the Slav tribes inhabiting that region and moved the Severians from the Veregava Pass (the Balkan Range) to the east and the remaining seven tribes southwards and westwards towards Avaria. Nicephorus relates these events in almost identical fashion. He wrote that the Proto-Bulgarians settled in that region when they saw that it was fortified and safe on all sides because of the river and the inaccessible land. They conquered the Slav tribes living nearby and ordered some of them to defend the lands bordering on the Avars and the other — to defend the lands bordering on the Romans. It becomes evident from the story of the Byzantine chroniclers that the Proto-Bulgarians established close contacts with eight Slav tribes and dislocated them with the aim of better defending the frontiers to the south against the Byzantine Empire and to the west against the Avar Khaganate. Moreover, the chroniclers state that the Proto-Bulgarians 'conquered' the Slavs. This, however, can hardly be accepted. It is illogical to presume that Asparouh and his company, who were engaged in hostilities against strong Byzantine forces, at the same time undertook to conquer the Slavs, too, the latter being some of the major and permanent enemies of the Empire, which had been doing its best to subjugate them. The opposite assumption is much more likely, i.e. that, having routed Constantine Pogonatus and gone far south of the Danube, the Proto-Bulgarian leader found in the



Slavs supporters and allies ready to help him in the further struggle against the common enemy. It was precisely this support which enabled the Proto-Bulgarians to conquer quickly and easily a comparatively large territory and advance southwards as far as Varna and the foothills of the Balkan Range.

The cooperation between Asparouh and the Slav tribal chieftains also explains the next important move reported by the Byzantine chroniclers – the dislocation of the Slav population aimed at strengthening the western and southern frontiers of the newly conquered region against possible attacks by Byzantines and Avars. This was a major undertaking called forth by military and strategic considerations in which the Slavs were assigned the important and responsible task of defending the conquered territory. Apparently Asparouh considered them reliable allies on whom he could count in the struggle against the dangerous enemies. Here is a good moment to recall that the Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs were not completely unfamiliar with one another and that contacts between the two ethnic groups had existed prior to their settlement in the Balkan Peninsula (mainly in Pannonia, and also in the vast territory between the rivers Seret, Prut, Dniester and Dnieper).

The fact that cooperation existed between Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs does not in any way exclude an indisputable fact, namely that the Proto-Bulgarian company which routed the Byzantine troops played a decisive role in the following events. That is why the Proto-Bulgarian Khan and his men were held in high repute. Asparouh was granted the right of a supreme sovereign and commander-in-chief of the whole ar-



my, which was later inherited by the succeeding khans (Tervel, Kormesii, Kroum, etc.).

The relations between the Proto-Bulgarian leader and the Slav tribal chieftains, which were based on a contract providing for the dislocation of the Slav tribes aimed at defending the southern and western frontiers, were an important step towards setting up a state organization.

The agreement between Asparouh and the Slav princes laid the beginnings of a strong administrative power, an apparatus of military and civil personnel to take care of the management of the common activities. The dislocation of the Slav tribes established the lasting frontiers of a definite territory of the conquered lands which had to be defended from the enemies – Avars and Byzantines. No doubt the existence of a definite territory and frontiers and a public and legislative power exercised by the Khan in cooperation with the Slav tribal chieftains are elements of a state organization. The Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs who began to live together under the same rule represent the third element.

The Byzantine chroniclers provide only scanty information about the events which followed. October and November 680 and the winter of 681 went by undisturbed and no new clashes took place between Byzantium and its northern neighbours. It is known that heated discussions on theological issues were held at that time in the Byzantine Empire and that a special ecumenical council was convened on November 7, 680 in Constantinople to tackle them. The Emperor himself took an active part in it, a fact which suggests that he no longer focused his attention on events north of the Balkan Range. The sessions of the council continued throughout the winter. At the same time as internal struggles on religious

issues were flaring up in the Byzantine Empire, Asparouh and his Slav allies were preparing for new clashes with the dangerous enemy in the spring. Such clashes took place indeed and the initiative this time was in Asparouh's hands. Having routed Constantine Pogonatus the year before and having secured cooperation with the Slav tribes, the Proto-Bulgarian Khan then had a large military force at his disposal and could continue the struggle on a broader front.

Theophanes reported that when the Bulgarians settled in these lands they became haughty and began to attack the fortresses and lands under Byzantine rule. According to Patriarch Nicephorus, when the Bulgarians grew stronger they began to ravage the villages and towns of Thrace. This information shows that Asparouh and his troops made incursions to the south of the Balkan Range and also westwards and that the Byzantines were not able to put up effective resistance to the invaders. They suffered a series of defeats and their towns and villages were devastated, as Patriarch Nicephorus stated explicitly.

The Byzantine Emperor Constantine IV Pogonatus, who took part in all the sessions of the ecumenical council, convened in Constantinople on March 18, 681, said that he was 'busy with state affairs' and, alarmed by the invasions of his northern neighbours, left the council. This shows that the Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs had begun their attacks in early spring and by March the situation of the Empire had already considerably deteriorated, moving the Emperor to take prompt measures. Constantine IV Pogonatus's personal involvement in the events was not very efficient as the Byzantines continued to suffer defeats in Thrace. This is eloquently testified to by the speech delivered by the Byzantine



clergyman Constantine of Apamea (Syria) at the 16th session of the ecumenical council in Constantinople on August 9, 681. He reproved those present at the council that if they had paid heed to his words and stopped the squabbles on theological issues they would not have suffered such defeats in the war with Bulgaria. This statement of the Syrian clergyman show that the attempts to oppose Asparouh had failed and that by the beginning of August, when this speech was made, the war against the northern neighbours was in fact already lost.

The Byzantine chroniclers Theophanes and Nicephorus also refer to the unsuccessful war waged against the Bulgarians. Theophanes wound up his story of the events following Asparouh's incursions into Byzantine territory by saying that the Emperor was forced to make peace with the invaders and to pay annual tribute for the numerous sins of the Byzantines and to their shame, because it was strange for the people from distant and neighbouring lands to learn that Byzantium, which had made all peoples to the east, to the west, to the north and to the south pay taxes to it, was defeated by this vulgar new people. Patriarch Nicephorus wrote even more laconically that when the Emperor saw the ravages performed by the Bulgarians he was forced to make peace with them on condition of paying tribute.

The Byzantine chroniclers do not state the exact date when the peace treaty was concluded between Asparouh and Constantine IV Pogonatus. However, if one takes into account the fact that the Emperor left the ecumenical council on March 18, 681 because of the attacks of the Bulgarians and that on August 9, 681 Constantine of Apamea noted with grief that the Byzantines suffered grievous hardships because



of their failure in the war with their northern neighbour, it may be assumed that the peace treaty between the two countries was signed during that period, i.e. between March 18 and August 9, 681. The information provided by Theophanes and Nicephorus shows that the Proto-Bulgarians launched several attacks and gives us reason to presume that the peace treaty was concluded most probably in the summer of 681.

The conclusion of the peace treaty is *de facto* recognition of the newly-founded state in the north-eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula as a result of the agreement between Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs and the victorious war against Byzantium. Like any other state organization, the Slav-Bulgarian state had all the elements inherent to a state administration, i.e. a definite territory restricted by frontiers, firmly established public power headed by the khan and the chieftains of the Slav tribes and a people which was subordinated to it.

The establishment of the state was not a spontaneous act, but a prolonged process which began with the incursions of the Proto-Bulgarians south of the Danube in April 680 and ended with the series of victories over the Byzantines which forced the Byzantine Emperor Constantine IV Pogonatus to conclude a lasting peace treaty with Asparouh and pay annual tribute.

Thus we can accept that the Slav-Bulgarian state was founded over the course of one year and by the middle of 681 it was already a strong military and political organization, forcing the Byzantine Empire to bow to its strength and recognize its *de facto* existence.

We know that during the reign of the first Khan Asparouh the Bulgarian state bordered on the Balkan Range to the south and on the Black Sea to the east. Its western frontier initially



was the Iskur River but after successful actions against the Avars it reached the Timok. Little is known of the northern frontier. It is certain that during Asparouh's reign Bulgaria included territories beyond the Danube which were inhabited by a numerous Slav population and also by some Proto-Bulgarians. Asparouh also controlled to the north-east the region reaching the Dniester, on which the Khazar state bordered.

From its very foundation the Slav-Bulgarian state was called Bulgaria. In his speech of 681 the Byzantine priest Constantine of Apamea referred to it as Bulgaria and so did other writers of the 7th and 8th centuries – Byzantine, Armenian, etc. Its subjects also referred to it as Bulgaria. The establishment of 'Bulgaria' as the name of the state is linked with the continuation of the terminological tradition of Koubrat's Great Bulgaria. The retention of this name points to the important role played by the Proto-Bulgarians in the building of the state as a result of their successful military actions against Byzantium and testifies to the leading role of the khan as supreme sovereign.

From the very beginning of the building up of the state, Pliska (near the present-day village of Aboba, in north-eastern Bulgaria) was appointed as its capital and the residence of the khan. Pliska emerged as a military camp and centre of administrative and religious life and later became an important economic and cultural centre. The town occupied the vast area of 23 sq km. It consisted of two parts – the outer and the inner towns. The outer town was surrounded by earthworks and a moat and the inner town – by a strong fortress wall with turrets. The common people – farmers and craftsmen – lived in the outer town, and the palaces of the ruler and the



aristocracy were in the inner town. Only their foundations have survived. These palaces were built during the reign of Khan Omourtag (814-831). One of them, known as the Big Palace or the Throne Palace, is 52 m long and 26.5 m wide. It was built of large square stone blocks and the walls at some places were 2.6 m thick. The so-called Small Palace is a complex architectural ensemble.

The archaeological finds made in the inner town testify to the existence of sewers and a water supply and also to air-heating installations (the so-called hypocausts). This shows the high level of urban civilization attained by the newly founded Bulgarian state, which quickly adopted and further developed the rich traditions of the local Thracian and Byzantine civilizations.

Intensive archaeological excavations have been carried out in recent years in Pliska. The fortification system of the inner town with its numerous defensive towers has been brought to light in almost its entirety. An interesting secret passage was found recently in the southern fortress wall. New types of dug-out dwellings of the common people and some tombs have also been discovered. The finds confirm the view that Pliska was initially a Slav settlement and that the Proto-Bulgarians settled there at a later date, when it became the residence of the khan. After Pliska was made the capital, Slavs and Proto-Bulgarians began to live side by side and this proved of great importance for the gradual merger of the two ethnic elements.

It is interesting to note the military and administrative organization of the newly-founded state. Our sources of information (mainly the stone inscriptions of the 9th century and also the works of Byzantine writers) indicate that the state



system was designed to suit the two ethnic elements — Slavs and Proto-Bulgarians — participating in it. This gave rise to a kind of administrative dualism which lasted for about a century and a half. On the one hand, there was a Proto-Bulgarian khan with his high officials among the Proto-Bulgarian aristocracy, who was considered supreme sovereign of the whole territory and commander-in-chief of the army composed of Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs. The khan ruled with the help of an apparatus of military and civil officials, subordinate to him and mainly of Proto-Bulgarian origin. On the other hand, the chieftains of the Slav tribes had an important role to play in the management of the state. They enjoyed a certain autonomy in their regions (the Slaviniyas) and had their own administrative and military apparatus. All Slav chieftains, however, recognized the supreme power of the khan as the autocratic ruler of their country or as *kupios*, i.e. master, as the Byzantine writers referred to him.

When Asparouh had already founded a state in cooperation with the Slav tribal chieftains, another Proto-Bulgarian leader, Kouber, came from Pannonia and penetrated deep into the Balkan Peninsula, settling in present-day Macedonia near the towns of Prilep and Bitolya. His men established close contacts with the local Slav tribes and mainly with the Dragovichis. This happened in 685 A.D. Kouber aimed at extending the region under his control, conquering Salonica and preparing an attack on the Byzantine capital. His ambitious plans, however, were betrayed and foiled. Kouber's Proto-Bulgarians had to be content with a comparatively small area surrounded on all sides by Slavs. Gradually they began to intermarry and in the course of a century and a half



were fully assimilated. The last reference to these Proto-Bulgarians is to be found in a Byzantine source of 718. In the second half of the 7th century another group of Proto-Bulgarians, also living in Pannonia, moved to Italy led by Altsek. Grimsald, then the king of the Langobardians, ordered them to settle in the southern parts of the country near the towns of Sepinum, Bovianum and Izeria. According to Paul Diaconus, an Italian chronicler of the Middle Ages, Altsek's Proto-Bulgarians lived in those regions up to the end of the 8th century and 'though they spoke Latin, they nevertheless did not forget the use of their own language'. Thus the Proto-Bulgarian ethnos divided into several groups.

## THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE STATE

The Bulgarian state which was founded in the north-eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula gradually began to extend its frontiers and include other Slav tribes of 'the Bulgarian group' in its territory. This was a policy pursued by the khans over some centuries. The first successes in this respect were scored during the reign of Asparouh's successor, Khan Tervel (701-718), when the region Zagore, to the south of the Balkan Range and between the present-day towns of Sliven and Nessebur, was annexed to Bulgaria. New territorial gains were achieved during the reign of Khan Kroum (803-814) and Khan Omourtag (814-831). A part of eastern Thrace with a large Slav population was added to Bulgaria's territory; the state also expanded to the south-west through the annexation of the ancient Thracian settlement of Serdica. By that time it was Slavinized to a considerable degree,



as is evidenced by the Slav name Sredets which persists in the Bulgarian monuments of the Middle Ages.

The Bulgarian state also enlarged its territory to the northwest at the beginning of the 9th century as a result of a successful campaign against the Avars in Pannonia and the agreement reached with the strong Frankish state. A vast region to the south and to the north of the Danube was annexed as far as the River Tissa (i.e. a part of present-day Romania, Hungary and Yugoslavia, where some Slav tribes of the Bulgarian group lived at that time).

During the reign of Khan Malamir (831-836), Omourtag's successor, the Bulgarian state gained new territories south of the Balkan Range with the inclusion of the Rhodope region and the Thracian Plain along the middle reaches of the Maritsa. At that time the Thracian centre Poulpoudeva (called Pluvdiv by the Slavs, the present-day Plovdiv) became part of Bulgaria. In this way almost all the Slav tribes in Thrace joined their natural political centre. This was a region in which a large Thracian population had lived for thousands of years and traces of it were still preserved in some religious rituals and traditions, in some aspects of material life and culture, in the names of local places and rivers. Thus, in the first quarter of the 9th century, the Thracian ethnos, which had already been almost entirely Slavinized, became a component of the expanded and consolidated Bulgarian state.

During the reign of Khan Presian (836-852) the Slav tribes inhabiting the south-western parts of the Balkan Peninsula (Rinhini, Strimontsi, Dragovich, Berziti, etc.) began to join the state, as their language and way of life were close to those of the Slav tribes in Moesia and Thrace. The Byzantine Empire, which was fighting a war against the Arabs, could not



halt this process. New Slav tribes were added to Bulgaria during the reign of Knyaz Boris (852-889).

During Simeon's reign (893-927) the expansion and consolidation of the Bulgarian state continued. At the beginning of the 10th century the Bulgarian state became one of the strongest political and military factors on the Balkan Peninsula. Its nucleus consisted of the regions to the south and the north of the Balkan Range extending as far as the Black Sea, the Aegean and the Adriatic. Its capital was Preslav.

Thus, after a period of great strain and frequent wars, the Bulgarian state — which had been founded on a relatively small area — considerably strengthened its position and became one of the strongest political formations in South-eastern Europe. This state emerged, too, as a historical successor of the one-time Thracian political formations, on the territory of which it had been set up and expanded. As an ethnos, however, the Thracian tribes were assimilated by the Slav tribes and the Slavs of the Bulgarian group became the core of the state.

The process of the inner consolidation, the liquidation of tribal fragmentation and strengthening the power of the ruler went side by side with the expansion and consolidation of the Bulgarian state. It served to strengthen the defensive and offensive might of Bulgaria in its struggle against its various enemies and the Byzantine Empire in particular.

A tendency of centralization was clearly manifested for the first time during the reign of Kroum. He was the first Bulgarian ruler of whom we know for sure that he took measures to extend the power of the khan in the frontier regions of the state and to reduce the powers of the local Slav princes. The so-called Hambarliiski inscription, written in



Greek dating back to Kroum's reign, testifies to this. The tribal principle, according to which the territory of the state was divided up into separate Slaviniyas, was abolished and an administrative organization in the spirit of strong centralism was set up.

The policy of centralization which Kroum pursued was continued by his successor Omourtag. There is evidence that the self-rule of the Slav tribes Timochani, Branichevtsi and Adobriti, who lived in the north-western parts of the Bulgarian state (along the middle reaches of the Danube and Tissa) was done away with during his reign. Some people who were loyal to the khan and bodies directly subordinated to him were sent to take the place of the Slav princes who had ruled up to that time. Omourtag's successors Malamir and Presian, and Knyaz Boris (852-889) most of all, ruled in his spirit. Christianity, which at that time was accepted as the official religion, played a very important role. It backed the view that the sovereign was appointed by God to rule his subjects, which strongly supported the aspirations for centralization and undermined the persisting decentralizing tendencies linked with the communal system. The theocratic and autocratic ideas disseminated by the clergy were even more clearly manifested during the reign of Boris's son, Tsar Simeon (893-927). The thesis that the ruler was appointed by God and had to exercise his power on the earth fully and unrestricted, as God ruled in heaven, was developed and given religious and theoretical backing during his reign.

Radical changes took place in the administrative organization of the Bulgarian state in the second half of the 9th century as a result of the consistent policy of centralization. The principle of the territorial division of the country in conformity with



the existence of different tribes was abandoned once and for all. A number of Slaviniias (of the Severians, Berziti, Dragovich, etc.), which had survived over many years in various parts of the country under the rule of the local Slav princes, were wiped out for good. New military and administrative units, which reflected the now completed process of liquidation of tribal fragmentation, were set up in their place from Boris's reign onwards. They were called *komitati* and each one was headed by a *komes* who enjoyed great power as a direct organ of the central administration. Other officials in the *komitati* were the so-called *tarkani*, which were also appointed by the sovereign. They were divided into different categories: *boritarkan*, *zera tarkan*, *olgou tarkan*, etc. There were also local judges, who administered justice on behalf of the ruler.

A system of legal norms valid for the whole population of the country was introduced during the reign of Knyaz Boris and Tsar Simeon corresponding to the spirit of centralization. This system was adopted and further elaborated on the model of Byzantine law, which found fertile soil for dissemination in Bulgaria after the introduction of Christianity as state religion. It is to be found in the well-known *Law on Bringing People to Trial*, which was probably drawn up soon after the adoption of Christianity in Bulgaria. This law contributed to the unification of the legal system of the state and made all subjects equal before the secular and religious laws which were binding on all. This, no doubt, played an important role in the all-round consolidation of the state and strengthened its inner unity.



## THE FORMATION OF THE BULGARIAN NATIONALITY

The process of the formation and establishment of the Bulgarian nationality was closely connected with the centralization of the Bulgarian state in the 9th and 10th centuries. On the one side, it boiled down to the gradual overcoming of the tribal fragmentation of the Slavs and their merger into one unit and, on the other, to the wiping out of the existing differences in the lifestyle, religion and language of the Slavs and Proto-Bulgarians and their unification into one and the same ethnic community.

The overcoming of the tribal fragmentation of the Slavs and their merger into one unit was facilitated by the neighbourhood of the Slav tribes of the Bulgarian group who lived on the territory of a common state and were able to maintain constant and close contacts. This happened mainly in the first half of the 9th century. The contacts of the Slavs in the economic, political, military and cultural spheres contributed to the rapid liquidation of the insignificant tribal and regional differences between them and to their transformation into a unified ethnic community.

Parallel with this, there proceeded the gradual merger of Slavs and Proto-Bulgarians into one nationality with the same self-awareness. In the 7th and to a greater degree in the 8th centuries this process was still in its initial stages. The Slavs and Proto-Bulgarians lived separated from each other and had different religions, language and lifestyle. As time went by, however, they came closer together, the main factor for this being the existence of a common state and foreign policy



directed towards resisting the attacks of the dangerous enemies and Byzantium, above all. This common policy, expressed in joint military campaigns, defensive undertakings to strengthen the frontiers and construction of fortresses and roads, contributed to the further cohesion of the two ethnic groups and created favourable conditions for overcoming the lifestyle, religious and linguistic alienation.

In the first half of the 9th century the process of the merger of Slavs and Proto-Bulgarians made considerable headway. The policy of centralization pursued by the Bulgarian rulers also gave an impetus to it as did the introduction of Christianity as the official religion. The latter created conditions for the spread of a common material and spiritual culture among all subjects of the state, the establishment of unified norms of social and personal behaviour, identical traditions, habits and views. Before the common Christian God the existing differences in religious beliefs, customs, clothes, etc., disappeared and all became equal in the name of the same faith. In this way the adoption of Christianity played an important, and in some respects a decisive role in the formation of the Bulgarian nationality.

This process was concluded after the introduction of the Slav script and culture by the disciples of Cyril and Methodius after 896 A.D. The activity of Clement and Naoum and the schools created by them in Ohrid and Preslav contributed to the spread of the Slavonic language throughout Bulgaria and Proto-Bulgarian, which anyway had been the language of the minority, gradually began to disappear. It was decided in 893 at the council in Preslav that Greek, which until then had been the official state language, should be replaced by Slavonic. Thus the Slavonic language established itself once



and for all as a spoken and literary language. It may be presumed that it was at the end of the 9th and the beginning of the 10th centuries, after the adoption of Christianity and the Slav script and culture, that the Bulgarian nationality was formed and consolidated. In fact, it was a Slav nationality, as the Slavs were predominant in it and the Thracians and Proto-Bulgarians had been assimilated and had lost their ethnic identity. This nationality was characterized mainly by a common language, (Slavonic, i.e. old Bulgarian) by a specific lifestyle and culture (predominantly Slav) and a common national identity. The common name 'Bulgarians', which in the 9th and 10th centuries was used throughout the state and which ousted the old tribal names, was a terminological expression of the already formed Bulgarian nationality. The name Bulgaria was accepted because it was linked with the name of the state from the time of its very foundation.

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Everything which has been said thus far shows that the foundation of the Bulgarian state played a major and decisive role in the country's all-round development in the Middle Ages. The Bulgarian state made possible the political unification of almost all the Slav tribes of the Bulgarian group and saved them from the danger of being gradually assimilated by the Byzantine Empire. The foundation of the Bulgarian state created conditions for the formation and consolidation of the Bulgarian nationality as a monolithic ethnic community, capable of defending its freedom and creating lasting material and cultural values. There is an indisputable link between the foundation and consolidation of the Bulgarian state, on the



one hand, and the formation and strengthening of the Bulgarian nationality, on the other. Both processes took place in the same period – 7th-10th centuries, they were closely linked and there was an essential logical interdependence between them.

The foundation of the Bulgarian state has another important historical consequence. It made possible the preservation and continuation under new socio-economic, political and ethnic conditions of the rich cultural heritage of the ancient Thracians. The latter was adopted by the Slavs and Proto-Bulgarians and became a lasting possession of the Bulgarian state and people down the centuries to the present day.

The founding of the Bulgarian state was an event which had important consequences for the fate of the South-eastern Europe and the Balkan Peninsula and in the Middle Ages. It is well known that even in the first years of its existence it became an important political and military factor and its presence was felt in the course of the events in the Balkan Peninsula. For example, Bulgaria's involvement in the events of 717-718 when the Arabs brought a large fleet and land army to the very walls of the Byzantine capital Constantinople. There was imminent danger of Constantinople being captured and the Arabs begin a stormy expansion across the Balkan Peninsula, as the Arab Caliphate had done on the Iberian Peninsula and in the state of the Franks. Thanks to the Bulgarian troops headed by Khan Tervel, the Arabs were defeated and an end was thus put to their aggressive aspirations. The role which the Bulgarian state played in these hard times for the Balkan Peninsula is told in detail both in the works of Byzantine and West-European writers of the



Middle Ages (Paul Diaconus, Landulfe, Zagaxus, and Alberich).

The Bulgarian state had an important say in events in the Balkan Peninsula and Central Europe at the beginning of the 9th century during Khan Kroum's reign. Bulgaria was then a mighty political and military factor which not only the Byzantine Empire but also the strong Frankish state had to take into consideration. With the active participation of the Bulgarians, the Avar Khaganate was destroyed, which for centuries had been an obstacle to the foundation of independent states in Central Europe and a constant threat to the western and southern Slavs in particular.

Bulgaria emerged as an important factor during the reign of Knyaz Boris and his son Simeon. It established still closer economic and political contacts with the neighbouring Balkan states (Byzantium, Serbia, Croatia) and also with some far-off countries (Great Moravia, Kievan Russia). As well as its influence on economic and political life, Bulgaria's voice in cultural affairs at that time became very strong. As is well known, the country became a centre of the Slav script and letters, which later spread among the other Slav peoples and mainly in Kievan Russia and Serbia. The reign of Tsar Simeon marked the culmination of the political and cultural might of the Bulgarian state. It was a genuine 'Golden Age' which was highly appraised by Chernorissets Hrabur, John the Exarch, Constantine of Preslav and other contemporaries of Simeon's reign.

The emergence and development of the Bulgarian state in the Middle Ages as a significant political force in the Balkans explains the great interest shown in it by Byzantine historians of the 7th-10th centuries. There are numerous references to Bulgaria and its rulers in the period under review in the works



of the Byzantine chroniclers Theophanes, Patriarch Nicephorus, Georgius Manachus and Theophanes's successors – Simeon Logothetos, Genesius, Leo Deacon, etc. Bulgaria's history aroused great interest among a number of West-European historians of the Middle Ages. It is worth noting that the very foundation of the Bulgarian state in 680-681 was mentioned in several West-European chronicles compiled in Italy, France and Germany as, for example, the chronicle of the monk Siegbert of the 11th century, the chronicle of Enrico Dandolo of the 14th century and in the so-called *Historia Palatina* of the 14th century. All these chronicles point out the victory of the Proto-Bulgarians invading the lands south of the Danube as an important event which marked the beginning of a new political formation of the Balkan Peninsula. The West-European annals of the Middle Ages also devote attention to some events in Bulgaria's history during the 8th and 9th centuries. Thus, for instance, the chroniclers wrote of the Bulgarians' participation in the war against the Arabs in 717-718, which was of decisive importance for the saving of the Byzantine Empire. The West European chronicles also tell of the important role which Bulgaria played in the south-eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula during the reign of Khan Kroum. The great defeat suffered by the Byzantine Emperor Nicephorus I in 811 and his death in the Balkan Range had wide repercussions. It was mentioned in the works of a number of Italian, German and French chroniclers of the 10th-14th centuries and they made the name of Bulgaria and its triumphant sovereign well known far beyond its boundaries.

Winding up, it should be emphasized once again that the foundation of the Bulgarian state at the end of the 7th century



and its consolidation during the next two centuries were events of great historical importance. Bulgaria was in fact the first Slav state in Europe in the Middle Ages which outstripped in its political, socio-economic and cultural development all later states of the southern, western and eastern Slavs. Bulgaria was the centre of the Slav script and culture and one of the principal mainstays of Slavdom in the Middle Ages against the encroachments of invaders and enemies. The Bulgarian state was that political and social organization which made possible the development and flourishing of Bulgarian culture in the Middle Ages, a culture which was not confined to the country alone but which spread to the neighbouring Slav peoples, too. Bulgaria was that political and military factor which predetermined in many respects the historical fate of the Balkan Peninsula for centuries to come. It is quite natural that the celebration of the 1,300th anniversary of the foundation of the Bulgarian state in 1981 will be a great public and cultural event for the whole Bulgarian people.

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